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WASHINGTON TURNS UP HEAT ON MARCOS

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WASHINGTON

The drum-beat of revelations in the United States aimed at discrediting President Marcos in advance of the Feb. 7 election in the Philippines underscores how anxious Washington is to see him replaced.

In the past two weeks, there have been major stories alleging Marcos is in extremely poor health, that his claims to heroism during World War II are largely fraudulent and that he and his wife have salted away many millions of dollars in the United States.

They have come against a background of repeated official warnings from the administration that the election must be fair, which is another way of saying the administration thinks Marcos will steal the election if he could.

A "If the White House had asked Bill Casey a year ago to devise a plan to get Marcos, he couldn't have done better than this," said a Pentagon analyst, referring to the director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

Officially, the administration is neutral in the campaign between Marcos and Corazon Aquino, the opposition candidate.

But interviews with officials who spoke on condition they not be identified disclose a virtually unanimous view that the Marcos government is rife with corruption and incapable of undertaking the political, military and economic reforms necessary to defeat a growing communist-led insurgency.

At stake for the administration, in addition to keeping the Philippines in the pro-West camp, are the largest U.S. military bases overseas - Subic Bay and Clark Field.

Some of the information aimed at discrediting Marcos comes from the many enemies Marcos has made in his 20 years of rule, especially in the large exile community in the United States, some of whom have fled for their lives.

But some of it also has originated from official sources. Rep. Stephen J. Solarz, D-N.Y., has been holding hearings before his House subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs on alleged U.S. investments of the Marcos family.

Whatever the origins of the information, the administration has made no effort to contradict or discourage the reports.

The State Department declined public comment on reports of Marcos' ill health, while privately confirming them, and officials said they wouldn't "second-guess" Army documents suggesting Marcos has falsified his war record.

With respect to evidence before the Solarz committee that Imelda Marcos, the president's wife, might own Manhattan real estate worth an estimated \$350 million, Paul Wolfowitz, the assistant secretary of state, said the government doesn't keep track of such investments by foreigners because they would not be illegal.

But the State Department later revealed it had routinely and not-so-routinely investigated whether the Marcos government might have misappropriated U.S. foreign aid funds.

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Spokesman Bernard Kalb said that while no evidence of wrongdoing had turned up so far, the investigation was not yet complete.

Reporters were reminded, too, that the Justice Department has been probing possible contract kickbacks involving the Philippine military for the past year.

Relations hadn't always been this bad between Marcos and the Reagan administration. Vice President George Bush praised Philippine democracy during a visit to Manila several years ago, and Marcos was warmly received at the White House.

Reagan had even planned to visit the Philippines in 1983, but the trip was quickly cancelled after Philippine opposition leader Benigno Aquino was murdered on his return from American exile in 1983.

Most officials see the murder of Aquino, husband of Corazon Aquino, as the watershed event that has turned the administration against Marcos.

Marcos still could win, and the administration is prepared to deal with him if he does. It is sending an official team of observers to view the election.

Washington knows, as Marcos does, that the United States could not afford to abandon the Philippines to the communists just because Marcos were to win a flawed election.

It is with the communist threat in mind, as well as the wish to support democracy, that the administration is pressing for a fair election.

U.S. pressures have worked to some degree, according to a State Department analyst who said Friday. "It is looking more and more like it will be a moderately fair election."

He said "the kicker" is whether an independent vote-monitoring group known as Namfrel will be able to conduct its own count of the vote on election day, to provide a back-up to the government count.

Marcos still hasn't approved, but Secretary of State George P. Shultz is understood to have pressed Assistant Foreign Minister Pacifico Castro in a meeting here last week. The message, of course, is that the administration does not trust the Marcos government to produce a fair count.

Another example of the U.S. pressure was the statement last week by Wolfowitz to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that a flawed election would be worse than no election, and would open the way to new communist inroads as people turned to "radical solutions" to achieve the changes they could not achieve at the polls.

Left unsaid by Wolfowitz and other officials is the widely held private view of many of them that the fairer the election, the better the chance Mrs. Aquino would win.

EDITOR'S NOTE: R. Gregory Nokes writes on diplomatic affairs for The Associated Press and has been focusing lately on the Philippines election.